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SUBJECT: NRW'S SPD LEADER SEES DAYLIGHT AT END OF LANDTAG OPPOSITION
TUNNEL

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: North Rhine-Westphalia's (NRW) opposition leader and SPD national vice chair Hannelore Kraft sees the May 2010 NRW Landtag election as wide open; the current black/yellow government does not have a lock on the state. She believes she was named national vice chair for a reason, knows it will be a bruiser of a campaign, with many appearances by national figures, and is well prepared. Her party's election platform will focus on education, the economy, combating rising debt and unemployment. But Kraft, an economist by training, is clear that money has to be invested - in early childhood education, for example - to reap savings later on. End Summary.

Batten Down the Hatches for the Landtag Election

¶2. (SBU) Kraft previewed the SPD strategy for the upcoming May 2010 NRW Landtag election for the CG. She sees (as she must) the NRW SPD as having some advantages over the national party. It obtained the best results in the 2009 local elections, regaining a number of important mayoral posts, thanks to door-to-door campaigning. It does not bear the burden of co-governance with the CDU, which blurred party lines and positions; rather, it has the advantage of sitting in opposition. In addition, she believes many did not vote for the national SPD because it was a party without a potential coalition partner. Local polling shows the current black/yellow government does not have a lock, per Kraft. She sees Forsa polls as unreliable, since they slice out NRW from their national results, rather than doing focused work. She relies instead on WDR polling, which she views as scientifically and statistically sound. Recent WDR polls show black/yellow no longer has a clear majority.

¶3. (SBU) Kraft believes that smaller parties will continue to gain at the expense of the larger ones, a trend that concerns her, since large parties have long been an anchor in German politics. It also tells her the SPD must work harder to win - or win back - its core constituencies. Responding to the CG's query, she affirmed she still sees the SPD as a "Volkspartei" - one that communicates the interests of the people writ large - despite recent losses. The SPD is working, for example, to win back disaffected trade unionists from the NRW "Linke" (the Left), which, unlike their more pragmatic brethren in the Saarland, Kraft sees as being run by hardliners who propose "crazy" things like nationalizing industry. Though she concedes the Left will probably make it into the Landtag, she doubts they will quickly learn the craft of compromise or governance. And despite her stated reluctance to shut doors publicly on potential coalition partners, she has done so already -

vociferously - regarding the Left.

Education Under One Roof

14. (SBU) The SPD will campaign on as many as five themes, including education reform, state and local finances, and economic innovation, all of which she sees as the Achilles' heels of the current NRW administration. Of those, education is near and dear to Kraft's heart. In order to further upward mobility, which she believes the current split school system stymies, she wants to see the fusion of the three current school types (Real-, Hauptschule, Gymnasium) into one school called a Gemeinschaftsschule (community school), similar to a middle school, for the fifth and sixth grades. Beyond the level of the Gemeinschaftsschule, the three current school types should be housed under one roof, to allow for further fluidity and real potential for students to advance to a Gymnasium, which offers the best educational qualifications. Kraft also sees a need to return to strict districting (to prevent the current parent-chosen clustering of students in "known" good schools), pay teachers more, and bring in more male teachers. She wants to eliminate all student payments associated with school attendance; it should all be financed by the state to provide equal opportunity to all, no matter the income or educational level of the parents.

Invest to Reap Rewards

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15. (SBU) Kraft, an economist by training, is adamant about the need to invest up-front in education. "Lost children" end up costing all levels of government considerably more than the initial investment in education. A single child who falls through the social net and ends up in juvenile detention costs upwards of \$100,000 per year. Kraft seeks expanded investments in preschools in order to ensure that language abilities of all 4-6 year olds (especially those of low-income and immigrant backgrounds) are up to par once they begin school (a program brought in by the current black/yellow government, which Kraft would like to expand). At the same time, she believes in investing in the parents, so they can learn how best to support their children's studies.

16. (SBU) While investment is key, Kraft believes the state of the cities - many of which are essentially bankrupt - and their decreasing ability to provide services, will be additional campaign themes. The economic crisis will continue to bite hard as those who have kept employees on as "short-time" workers may start letting people go. Unemployment - especially in already hard-hit areas of the Ruhr - will be another topic, as well as the need to support small- and medium-sized firms.

Comment: It's Campaign Time and More

17. (SBU) The Landtag campaign - which all say will officially begin after Easter - is well underway. Not only Kraft, but CDU contacts, tell us they already have more offers of appearances by national figures than they will be able to use. When Kraft says the SPD can upset the current black/yellow coalition in NRW, it's clearly more than a politician talking - she means it. It would be a coup for her to break the SPD's losing streak.

All know the black/yellow majority in the Bundesrat is at stake,
but Kraft - and current M-P Ruettgers - also see themselves as
running a referendum on the new federal coalition.

WEINER